



GLAD TIDINGS

The Story of Ten Carols

by Paul R. Otte

INTRODUCTION

Christmas!

“Christmas is my favorite time of the year.” Many people resonate with this statement, but for different reasons. For some, the reason may be precious memories of childhood ... families sharing a spirit of togetherness unequaled at any other time ... thinking of friends and relatives as we shop for that one special gift that expresses our love ... or it could be the decorations and carols proving that the message of Christmas is so grand, that nothing in life will be considered ordinary for these special days in December. For Christians, Christmas is wonderful because it recalls the day when God stepped into this lost world to change it forever, to win it back for no other reason than God’s divine love that would save His rebellious creation at any cost. (2 Corinthians 5:19)

But there’s another reason to delight in this holy season. Though some of us bemoan Christmas as the supreme example of our culture secularizing a religious festival, the opposite may well be true! Without Christmas, could you imagine pop singers crooning words in public like “The Lord is come,” “God and sinners reconciled,” and “Son of God, Love’s pure light”? Every time the word “Christmas” appears, “Christ” is in it, and that word means “Savior.” It is a constant reminder throughout our religious or secular celebrations of the true reason we celebrate at all: Jesus, the Christ, has come! It is His birth about which we sing and rejoice. In fact, on the very night of His birth, some 2000 years ago, the world’s first Christmas carol was sung by a chorus of angels sharing the message with shepherds outside a small city in Palestine. Today’s carols continue to celebrate and share that message. In them may be found the story, the love, and the beauty of Christmas.

There are ten carols that we will look at in this booklet, and we’ll do so in what I hope is a unique way. We will use each letter of the word “Christmas!” to suggest a unique contribution made by one of our ten carols:

C is Confession,
h is Heart,
r is Riddle,
i is Irony,
s is Serenity,
t is Tell,
m is Melody,
a is Angel Authors,
s is Stars, and
! is Excitement!

C – A Carol of Confession

Every Christmas Eve since 1918, the world famous “Service of Nine Lessons and Carols” from Kings College, Cambridge, England has begun with the singing of the same Christmas carol. It is a hauntingly beautiful, yet serene and simple carol called “Once In Royal David’s City.” One of the most beloved of English carols, it is fast becoming an American favorite as well. Like many great works of literature or poetry, its genius can best be understood by meeting its author. Cecil Frances Alexander (1823-95) is a person any of us would have been honored to know. Born in Dublin, she lived her entire life in Ireland. She had a lifelong passion for the religious education of children. Before her marriage to Anglican clergyman, Rev. William Alexander, she and her sister established a school for the deaf. Throughout her days, she was known for her tireless efforts on behalf of children, the sick, the poor, and young women.

She was a truly remarkable woman who published many books of original religious poetry and hymns. Her most famous was *Hymns for Little Children*, 1848, which included our carol and two other well known hymns: “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” and “There Is a Green Hill Far Away” (written at the bedside of a sick child). Attesting to the success of this hymnal, forty years later, it was in its 67th edition! About children’s hymns, she said, “a namby-pamby, childish style is most unpleasing to children,” and that “it is surprising how soon they can understand and follow a high order of poetry.” Just as the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols begins with “Once In Royal David’s City,” we have begun our exploration of Christmas carols with this gem, because it is a fine example of CONFESSIO (here used to mean a statement of belief). It tells and teaches the story of Christmas, and in singing it, each of us can confess our faith. The story of Christmas is so wonderful that Cecil Alexander begins her carol like a fairy-tale:

*Once in royal David’s city Stood a lowly
cattle shed
Where a mother laid her baby In a manger
for His bed;
Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ
her little child. (stanza 1)*

One can easily imagine Cecil Alexander bending low to the face of a child and teaching this wondrous story through her poetry. And it truly is a teaching piece, for her hymnal, *Hymns for Little Children*, was organized as an instruction book in Christian teaching. Our carol is intended to illuminate the truth that Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary.”

We believe that Jesus Christ is truly God as an ancient Creed states, “God of God,” “who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven.” Alexander writes:

*He came down to earth from heaven Who
is God and Lord of all,
And His shelter was a stable, And His
cradle was a stall;
With the poor and mean and low Lived
our Savior long ago. (stanza 2)*

Jesus became a true human being, that is “was incarnate (literally: came in a body) by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man.” She writes:

*For He is our childhood's pattern: Day by
day, like us, He grew,
He was little, weak and helpless, Tears
and smiles like us He knew;
And He feeleth for our sadness, And He
shareth in our gladness. (stanza 4)*

Few carols of Christmas can stand up as well as this one in setting forth both the story and the beauty of Christmas. The graceful melody by British scholar and composer Henry J. Gauntlett is the perfect match for this lovely carol. Cecil Alexander brings the story into the reality of our lives and adds a burst of excitement in the last two stanzas:

*But our eyes in truth should see Him
Through His own redeeming love,
For that Child so dear and gentle Is our
Lord in heav'n above,
As He leads His children on To the place
where He is gone.*

*Not in that poor, lowly stable With the
oxen standing by
Shall we see Him, but in heaven, Set at
God's right hand on high.
Then like stars His children, crowned, All
in white, His praise will sound!*

H – A Carol of The Heart

A child cartoon character in the newspaper once said: “God invented time so everything wouldn’t happen at once.” And people have been pondering the meaning of time ever since.

In its own way, Christmas makes us think about time. For example, the subject of “Christmas Carols” reminds us that Charles Dickens imagined a ghost of Christmas past, a ghost of Christmas present, and a ghost of Christmas yet to come in his “Christmas Carol.” Of 184 words in our next carol, twenty-nine of them make reference to time. (Ere the worlds began to be, are, have been, future years, evermore, evermore, forever, When, First, evermore, evermore, in old time, long-expected, evermore, evermore, evermore, evermore, eternal, evermore, evermore.) This carol is titled, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.” It doesn’t sound like the typical jolly Christmas carol, perhaps because it takes us way back in time to the fourth century where we meet its author, Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-413). Prudentius was a successful lawyer in Spain who held many important positions in the Roman Empire including that of chief of Emperor Honorius’ imperial bodyguard. After many years of public service, he decided at the age of 57 to serve a higher authority and devote his HEART and life to the writing of sacred poetry and devotional literature to help the people of his day to better understand Christianity.

There was a need for this increased understanding. There were many false teachings in the Church in those days, particularly that of Arianism which taught that Jesus was somehow less than God—that He was an ordinary human who was adopted by God for a certain role. Arianism had its roots in Greek philosophy, and since many Christians were newly converted from other religions and philosophies in those days, Prudentius’ poetry was sorely needed by the Church, as we shall see.

One of his works titled “Cathemerinon” (“throughout the day”) is a series of hymns to be used in private devotions as the title implies. They focus mostly on the doctrine of Jesus Christ. It is from this work that “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” is taken. It comes to us through the translating pen of John Mason Neale (1818-1866), whom some consider to be the “prince of translators.” Its Latin title was “Corde natus ex parentis” and its literal translation would be, “Begotten of a Parent’s HEART.”

This magnificent carol, like the Christ it describes, has a dual nature. Its impeccable poetic rhythm and elegant plainsong melody (called, “Divine Mystery”) give it a feeling of rapturous flow, as if it came from the beginning of time. And yet its text is so powerful that it could be called “The Battle Hymn of Nicaea”! What does that mean??!! Remember the Arian false teaching mentioned above? A great church council was convened by Constantine just a few years before Prudentius was born which clearly set forth the Bible’s teaching about Jesus Christ. This was the Council of Nicaea and it set forth clear teaching on the doctrine of the Trinity and of the role of the birth of Christ in that doctrine. Hardrock theology is proclaimed by the gentlest poetry:

*Of the Father’s love begotten Ere (before)
the worlds began to be.
He is Alpha and Omega, He the source, the ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been, And that future years shall see
Evermore and evermore.*

Folded into these few lines are the deep truths of John 1:1-3 and Revelation 1:8.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:1-3).

“ ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty’ ” (Revelation 1:8).

Prudentius chose the word corde (heart) to reflect the loving God of Scripture, rather than the unknowable god of the Arians. He chose the word parentis (parent) to show that Jesus and God the Father are made of the same stuff, that is, Jesus IS God. He was there at creation, not adopted at some point in time—in the words of the statement that came out of the Council of Nicaea (The Nicene Creed), “begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”

Strong theological language continues in stanza two which recalls the Christmas story:

*Oh, that birth forever blessed,
When the virgin, full of grace
By the Holy Ghost conceiving, Bore the
Savior of our race.
And the Babe, the world’s Redeemer First
revealed His sacred face.
Evermore and evermore.*

Prudentius is still looking back to the eternal existence of Jesus as he says “the world’s Redeemer First revealed His sacred face,” implying that the sacred face existed before but is first revealed at Christmas.

*This is He whom seers in old time
Chanted of with one accord,
Whom the voices of the prophets
Promised in their faithful word;
Now He shines the long-expected;
Let creation praise its Lord
Evermore and evermore.*

Stanza three looks back in time again to the prophets or seers “in old time” who foretold Christ’s birth. “Now He shines, the long-expected.” These words again refer to the past. Indeed, this plan of salvation and the Savior Himself had their source in God the Father ’s HEART of love for us.

*Let the heights of heav’n adore Him;
Angel hosts, His praises sing;
Pow’rs, dominions, bow before Him
And extol our God and King;
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
Ev’ry voice in concert ring
Evermore and evermore.*

Stanza four calls all creation to eternal song. And the last stanza tells us all what to sing. Sing the salvation of our God! Sing the doctrine of the Holy Trinity! Sing of the love in God’s HEART!

*Christ, to You, with God the Father
And the Spirit, there shall be
Hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
And the shout of jubilee:
Honor, glory, and dominion
And eternal victory
Evermore and evermore!*

The carol ends once again with the concept of time. Three of the last five words at the end of the carol deal once again with the concept of time, only this time looking forward: “eternal victory Evermore and evermore!”

R – A Riddle Carol

*Please take notes with poetry,
A bit of dance, a bit of glee,
A smidgeon of theology.
A famous birth is heard in me.
What am I?*

To solve this riddle, unscramble the following letters: “MACHO TRAIL SCARS.” Just about everybody loves a good riddle, unless of course it’s too hard. I hope you got this one. If not, read on and I’ll tell you the answer later. One person who must have liked riddles was Martin Luther. When he was a young man, he and other young people would get together at a party and play a popular singing game involving riddles.

Each young man would take his turn singing:

*From distant lands to you I come
And bring good news to everyone
I bring so much you'd like to know
Much more than I shall tell you though.*

He would then pose a riddle to one of the young ladies. If she could not solve it, she would have to give him her wreath. Have you solved my riddle or do I have your wreath? The answer to the riddle posed above is "A Christmas Carol." And that is what Luther made out of the party game.

Dr. Luther had the custom of celebrating Christmas Eve with his family by arranging a family program. For one of those programs, he paraphrased the party song to carry the Christmas message. The result is the carol:

*From heaven above to earth I come
To bring good news to everyone!
Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To all the world and gladly sing . . .*

Follow this stanza with "Who am I?" and it's a riddle! Luther intentionally leaves out the identity of the singer making you figure out that it is the angel speaking to the shepherds about the birth of the Savior. The good news about Jesus' birth all becomes clear as the carol continues:

*To you this night is born a child
Of Mary chosen virgin mild . . .
This is the Christ, God's Son most high . . .*

When it comes to the message of the birth of Jesus, Luther knows that there can be no riddles, no guesswork. This Gospel must be proclaimed with all the clarity and certainty that can be mustered. And yet, with a twinkle in his eye, Dr. Luther scattered more riddles throughout the fifteen stanzas of the carol. The words of the angel to the shepherds (Luke 2:12) are presented as the clues of a riddle:

*These are the signs which you will see
To let you know that it is He:
In manger bed, in swaddling clothes
The Child who all the earth upholds.*

Reading through the rest of the carol reveals even more riddles, some answered, some unanswerable:

*Look, look, dear friends, look over there!
What lies within that manger bare?
Who is that lovely little One?
(answer:)
The baby Jesus, God's dear Son . . .*

*How can our thanks such love repay? . . .
(unanswerable)*

*O Lord, You have created all!
How did You come to be so small . . . ?
(unanswerable)*

The fifteen stanzas are often sung in varying order and by different groups or soloists since some verses portray the angel, the shepherds, and the reaction of God's people to the news of Christmas. However it is sung, it will always be cherished by the Christian Church as a truly fine (and fun!) Christmas carol.

Before we leave this carol, we must say a word about the melody. Scholars think that on that first performance of "The Riddle Carol" (probably in 1534), the traditional folk melody of the party game was used. But Luther liked his carol enough to write a new melody for it a few years later. Luther's melody paints a musical picture of stanza one. It begins "in heaven above" by starting at the top of the scale. The last line of the melody makes a downward musical scale to show not only the journey of the angel "From heaven above to earth" but also to mark the same journey by the Savior. The melody has been used and therefore honored by many composers by using it in cantatas and instrumental compositions, especially Johann Sebastian Bach.

I – An Ironic Carol

One of the most fascinating of all literary devices is IRONY, through which authors and poets point out amazing contradictions and turnabouts. For example, it seems the best mysteries are those in which the "who" that "dunnit" is the one you'd least suspect. There are many ironies in the Christmas story which are pointed out in the poetry of the carol "Let All Together Praise Our God." The words and the melody are by the German Lutheran musician named Nikolaus Herman (c.1480 - 1561). As is often the case with

musicians, (remember Cecil Frances Alexander?) Nikolaus had a heart for children. He wrote many of his hymns for them and even wrote a book about the Christian education of children. Even though this carol is one of his songs written for children, he doesn't begin in a childlike way with the story of the baby Jesus being born. Instead, he gets right to the theological truth behind the birth.

*Let all together praise our God
Before His glorious throne;
Today He opens heav'n again
To give us His own Son.*

In stanza two, he begins pointing out the opposites, the ironies.

*The Father sends Him from His throne
To be an infant small
And lie here poorly mangered now
In this cold, dismal stall.*

Note the contrasting pairs of words or phrases: God's Son—infant small, glorious throne—cold, dismal stall. Who sits on a throne but someone rich and powerful? Yet now he lies "poorly mangered."

Stanza three continues the lovely litany of opposites: "Within an earth -born form He hides His all-creating light." "Form" is contrasted with "light." One that is "earth- born" is created. Christ is called "all-creating." Even for a children's song, Nikolaus is selecting his words with great care to reveal eternal truths! "To serve us all He humbly cloaks the splendor of His might"— opposites again.

Beginning in stanza four, he clearly expresses what he has been hinting at with the contrasting terms used in the first three stanzas.

*He undertakes a great exchange,
Puts on our human frame,
And in return gives us His realm,
His glory, and His name.*

This “exchange” is not a fair trade at all! This, for Nikolaus Herman is the theme of this carol—the great irony: that God did all this for no practical reason at all, but to save the undeserving and to serve the unworthy. Look at the resulting situation.

*He is a servant, I a lord:
How great a mystery!
How strong the tender Christ child's love!
No truer friend than He.*

The theme of “opening heaven” from stanza one is touched upon in stanza 6. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, they had to leave the Garden of Eden (Paradise) and an angel was posted to keep everyone out (Genesis 3:24).

*He is the key and He the door
To blessed paradise;
The angel bars the way no more,
To God our praises rise:*

*Your grace in lowliness revealed,
Lord Jesus, we adore
And praise to God the Father yield
And Spirit evermore.*

The melody was also written by Nikolaus Herman, but not for this carol. It is a unique melody with many repeated notes recalling trumpet fanfares which might be used for important announcements. Nikolaus originally wrote the tune for another children’s song about the greatest “Announcer” in the Bible, John the Baptist! How appropriate then, that John the Baptist’s tune should be used to this day to announce the birth of Christ. That’s perhaps a bit of IRONY in itself!

S – A Serene Carol

Ask ten people what their favorite Christmas carol is, and more than half will choose “Silent Night.” The title itself captures what for many people is the essence of Christmas, a feeling of peace, both earthly and spiritual. The angels who appeared to the shepherds on that wondrous night were the first to proclaim the two reactions to the Christmas message: glory to God and peace to the earth.

When a piece of music comes along and thoroughly captures the spirit of something, a first reaction is often to attribute the great achievement to a great musical achiever. And so it was, that for many years “Silent Night” was said to have been a German folk melody, or that it was written by Mozart, or by Joseph Haydn. But it was not written by any of these musical giants who wrote volumes of music and song. In fact, it was the only hymn written by Joseph Mohr set to the only melody still known by Franz Gruber.

The carol had been spread all over Europe and even America within twenty years of its writing, along with the incorrect notations about its authorship and composition! It wasn’t until 1854 that Franz Gruber wrote a letter to Berlin documenting its true origin.

The peaceful nature of “Silent Night” is somewhat miraculous. It was written because of a calamity! Joseph Mohr was the parish priest at St. Nikolaus Church in Oberndorf, Austria in 1818 and Franz Gruber was the organist there. Both had prepared themselves for a glorious Christmas celebration. Everything was ready . . . everything, that is, except the organ. It gave out on December 24! What could be done? Even though the choirs were well trained and knew their cantatas well, to sing the elaborate Christmas chorales unaccompanied was out of the question.

Joseph needed something new. He hastily wrote a new poem and called upon Franz to write a melody simple enough that it could be accompanied on the guitar. Both knew they wouldn’t have time to teach even this simple carol to the choir in time, so they decided to sing the song as a duet with the choir repeating just the last line of each verse. I can imagine the tension of the first performance . . . No organ for Christmas! . . . A new song for the choir at the last minute! . . . Will we get through it? . . . Will the people be disappointed? But when midnight came, out of the most penetrating silence there is—the silence just before a nervous musician begins a potentially shaky performance—out of this silence arose the comfort and serenity of “Silent Night, Holy Night.”

What gives this carol its genius? Perhaps it is because the words are so far removed from prose, that they are nearly pure poetry. There is hardly any grammar, no story is told, no theology taught, only images and fragments like so many gentle waves washing over a sandy shore:

*Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright . . .
Silent night, holy night, Shepherds quake at the sight;
Glories stream . . . heaven afar, heav’nly hosts . . . Alleluia!
Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love’s pure light,
Radiant beams . . . Your holy face, with the dawn . . . redeeming grace.*

There’s a parable here. In the midst of bad news and panic, God brought about the world’s most famous and serene Christmas carol. And in this world of bad news, God can still bring peace of mind to troubled and anxious souls “with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus Lord, at Your birth.”

T – A Telling Carol

Christ said, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15). Jesus knew He needed to say that, because oftentimes a Christian needs to be told to tell. Shouldn’t it come naturally to spread good news of any kind, especially THE Good News? To be sure, the Gospel includes all of Christ’s life and work, but in the season of Christmas, we have the cheeriest part of it, the easiest part to tell. And still we need to be told to tell.

Adults are the best when it comes to withholding good news. Keeping a stoic face in the midst of merriment takes time and practice, and some of us are very accomplished at this art of concealment. On the other hand, children are no good at it. When young children have good news, they come bursting upon us with a face and a voice and body language that betrays even the strictest confidence and out it comes! Ask a child to keep a secret of really good news. You’ll have as much success as if you would ask the sun to stop shining. Call it innocence or lack of inhibition or call it what you will. It is something we need to recapture so the great task of spreading the Gospel can take flight and soar.

Whoever wrote our next carol knew all about childish enthusiasm. It is about three children in Bethlehem on Christmas night. Two are named Jeanette and Isabella. The third calls out to them, inviting them to come and see. I like to think that this unnamed character was one of the shepherds who saw the baby Jesus. St. Luke says they “spread the word concerning what had been told to them about this child” (Luke 2:17). But he must have been

writing about adults when he wrote, “and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” Do you think the children are going to sit at home and “wonder at those things?” Quite a different picture is presented in the carol:

*Bring a torch, Jeanette, Isabella!
Bring a torch, to the cradle (stable) run!
It is Jesus, good folk of the village;
Christ is born and Mary’s calling,
Ah! Ah! beautiful is the mother;
Ah! Ah! beautiful is her Son.*

“Get up! Get out of bed! Get your flashlight! You’ve got to see this!” Here is witnessing and worship of the first magnitude. The reaction of Jeanette and Isabella must have been as enthusiastic. When they get to the manger, they’re making so much noise that a reprimand is in order.

*It is wrong when the Child is sleeping,
It is wrong to talk so loud;
Silence, all, as you gather around,
Lest your noise should waken Jesus;
Hush! Hush! See how fast He slumbers.
Hush! Hush! See how fast He sleeps.*

This “noel,” as you may have guessed by the girls’ names, is French from the region called Provence. (In France, a “carol” is called a “noel.”) Originally “Un flambeau, Jeannette, Isabelle,” it has appeared in a number of English versions, the most popular being the one by Englishmen Edward Cuthbert Nunn (1868-1914). Some speculate that the original was written by Nicholas Saboly (1614-1675). The melody is the perfect match for this charming story of graceful children telling one another of the news of the birth of Christ.

Here’s a lesson for us all. Perhaps the best witness for Christ at Christmas or at any other time has little to do with theo- logical persuasion or cleverness. The required technique may be like that of children. Let others see the love and excitement you have in your heart for the Savior. Some say creativity is ten percent inspiration and ninety percent perspiration. Perhaps witnessing is ten percent inspiration and ninety percent invitation. Bring a torch! Come and see what has me so excited!

(**Footnote:** This is an example of a fine carol or hymn that doesn’t rhyme. Are there others? How about “O Come, All Ye Faithful”?)

M – A Mysterious, Melodic Carol

The only thing about our next carol that is not confusing is its message and the fact that it is clearly for children. Author Albert Edward Bailey writes “No trace of an author for this perfect child’s hymn has been found nor has the date of its composition been established. It needs no interpretation, for both in thought and imagery it is on the child’s level.” (*The Gospel in Hymns*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1950)

Now when you saw the term “perfect child’s hymn,” which carol came to mind? I’m sure many would have guessed, “Away in a Manger.” One reason for the confusion of authorship is that it was first published in Philadelphia in 1887 with the heading, “Luther’s Cradle Hymn” (Composed by Martin Luther for his children, and still sung by German mothers to their little ones). This myth persisted for many years. In fact, the carol was unknown before 1885 and until recently, never even appeared in a German translation. It is truly an American

carol. One can only speculate that it may have been written in honor of the four hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth, which was celebrated by the large German Lutheran community in Pennsylvania.

There is a telling term in use today that applies primarily to popular music. It is "songwriter." Since a song consists of words AND music, a contemporary songwriter is usually responsible for both. Most people in our culture tend to assume that most "songs" were written by a songwriter, that is, by one person who wrote both words and melody. It comes as a surprise to many that this is a fairly recent development. A more traditional situation is one in which the composer of the music and the author of the text are two different people.

Some argue that creativity and skill in one area or the other is rare enough, and to search for both in one individual is expecting too much. It may well be the better part of wisdom to try to be a great poet OR a great composer, not both. In opera and in musical comedies a collaboration is the norm, like George (music) and Ira (text) Gershwin, or Rodgers (music) and Hammerstein (text). In hymns and carols, the composer and author may never even have known one another, and may even have lived centuries apart.

"Away in a Manger" is a good example of this division of labor. It is such a good example in fact, that several composers have provided melodies for "Away in a Manger." It has been sung to so many different tunes, that singers aren't always sure which melody they will hear when it is sung. History has sifted out three which are in common use today. The one that starts at the top of the scale and descends is perhaps the most common one in America. No one knows who wrote it. Another melody often heard is by Jonathan E. Spilman (1812-1896) which was composed originally for "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton." The third one was written by William James Kirkpatrick (1838-1921). I suppose everyone has their own favorite.

Whichever melody is used, the carol works its way into the hearts of children and remains there through life. Who can forget: the sympathy generated by the line "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed," or the affection strengthened by singing "I love thee, Lord Jesus" or the "sweet" vision of "the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay," or the mental picture of the the stable made real for animal-loving children by singing "The cattle are lowing" (even if they don't know what "lowing" means)?

Dr. John T. McFarland of New York added a third stanza sometime around 1905 at the request of his friend, Methodist Bishop, William Anderson. This stanza takes the form of a child's prayer that we would all do well to pray often:

*Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And take us to heaven to live with Thee there.*

A – Anonymous Angelic Authors

Here we have been exploring several Christmas carols and we never defined our terms! Our next carol gives us a good opportunity to study the word "carol." In modern usage, it simply refers to a traditional song on the subject of Christmas. Long ago, however, the term referred more to the type of song it was than to its subject matter.

A carol was a song which alternated stanzas with a refrain which is repeated after each stanza. Except in those days, they didn't call it a "refrain," they called it a "burden!" By that definition, hymns like "Lift High the Cross," or songs like "Sixteen Tons" would fit the definition of a "carol" (one with a light burden, the other with a heavy burden—OOH! Bad pun!).

The carol of which we speak is “Angels We Have Heard on High.” The “burden” or refrain is:

Glo—ria in excelsis deo.
Glo—ria in excelsis deo.

The carol is particularly fun because the stanzas and the burden stand in such contrast. The melody of the stanzas is plain and simple as narration should be. The melody of the burden is florid and elaborate as the songs proclaiming “Glory to God in the Highest” should be. (By the way, that’s what “Gloria in excelsis deo” means.)

The stanzas take on a most interesting form reminiscent of Hebrew poetry which rhymed ideas instead of sounds. The melody of the stanzas is essentially two phrases which are identical, like an echo. And so the first stanza identifies this phenomenon:

Angels we have heard on high,
Sweetly singing o’er the plains,
And the mountains in reply,
Echoing their joyous strains.

This is the perfect text for this echoing melody. The succeeding stanzas perfectly mimic Hebrew poetry as they consist of two lines in which the second line repeats the thought of the first line with slightly different words:

Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
Which inspire your heav’nly song?

Stanza three performs the same echo of meaning:

Come to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing;
Come, adore on bended knee
Christ the Lord, the newborn king.

We see the same style (minus the rhyming sounds) in the pairing of phrases in the Psalms, for example, Psalm 67:1-3.

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face shine upon us, that Your ways be known on earth, Your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise You, O God; may all the peoples praise You.

I’d like to tell you about the author of “Angels We Have Heard On High.” I’d like to, but I can’t. There are some fanciful legends about its authorship, including one that goes back to the year A.D. 129 involving Bishop Telesphorus of Rome. But neither the author of the original French carol nor the author of the English translation is known.

But the authorship of the burden (the refrain) is another matter. “Who wrote it?,” may not be the correct question. Perhaps we should ask, “What wrote it?,” because these words came first not from the pen of any human being, but from the voices of heaven! One of the great joys of Christmas is echoing the song of those wondrous servants of God, the angels, who played such important roles in announcing to the world the magnificent plan of God, our Savior’s birth. “Gloria in excelsis deo!”

S – A Star Carol

Having heard the fascinating story behind “Silent Night,” and finding out the author’s intent in such carols as “Once in Royal David’s City,” it is clear that learning about the author can be half the fun!

New carols are still being written and the chance to interview the author of a carol is a wonderful opportunity not to be missed. Such an author is Dr. F. Samuel Janzow, born in 1913 in Calgary, Alberta. After becoming a minister, he served as a pastor in London, England and in Trimont, Minnesota. In 1962, while teaching English and Theology at Concordia University, River Forest, Illinois, he was inspired to write a Christmas carol. The carol was to be a thank offering to the Lord for a special blessing Dr. Janzow had received. He remembers spending his Christmas vacation of that year writing and refining the new carol “From Shepherding of Stars.”

It first appeared in a campus publication where it was read by the editor of “Lutheran Education,” who wanted to publish the new Christmas poem as a carol. For this purpose it needed a melody. Another faculty member, Dr. Richard Hillert, was asked to write a melody for the carol. Dr. Hillert decided to write a simple melody using a pentatonic scale (only five different pitches) since “Lutheran Education” was about the education of children. Sometime after the carol was published, the author received a letter of thanks which said, “It is so refreshing to hear a Christmas carol that tells the reason Christ was born.”

Here follows Dr. Janzow’s own thoughts about the new carol:

*From shepherding of stars that gaze
Toward heav’nly fields of light,
I come with tidings to amaze
You watchers in the night.
You watchers in the night.*

This first stanza bears a similarity to Luther’s riddle carol. It is sung by an unidentified character. “Who am I?” The answer here is the same as for “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.” The speaker is an angel. Angels are mighty spirits of the Lord that serve Him and carry out His will. This angel’s previous assignment was to guide the stars in their courses, to “shepherd” them. The stars in the sky are like a flock of sheep gazing toward heavenly fields of light. In Dr. Janzow’s mind, perhaps this shepherd of stars was chosen to speak to the shepherds of sheep because the angel could identify with them. The angel comes with tidings to the shepherds and to us because we are also, in a sense, “watchers in the night.” At times we are all in the darkness of life as we go about our earthly tasks.

*Your shepherd King from starlit hall
Bends down to weary lands,
Lies mangered low in cattle stall.
Go touch His infant hands.
Go touch His infant hands.*

After meeting a shepherd of stars and shepherds of sheep, we meet a third shepherd. This is “The Shepherd King,” the Good Shepherd. The invitation to “touch His infant hands” is an expression of tenderness. This is what we tend to do when we meet an infant. It isn’t the last we will hear of His hands in this carol.

*This night your King brings from afar
The virgin’s lullaby,
The Wise Men’s faith, a guiding star,*

*And love from God most high,
And love from God most high.*

Dr. Janzow says “This night” happens every year. The elements mentioned in this verse are somewhat disconnected. For example, the Wise Men weren’t present when Jesus was in the manger. But on this night, God brings all the elements together, “brings them from afar,” to tell us the story of salvation.

*He shepherds from the thistled place
The flocks by thickets torn;
His pierced hands heal all your race
Sore wounded by the thorn,
Sore wounded by the thorn.*

In stanza four, Dr. Janzow tells “the reason Christ was born” as referred to in the letter above. This reason is that He might be crucified. This earth has become “the thistled place” with the “thickets” having a piercing “thorn” because of the curse of sin: “*Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you . . .*” (Genesis 3: 17-18).

When the sheep gets stuck in the thicket, the shepherd must reach in there to get it out. Many a shepherd has experienced wounding of the hands by thorns in this rescue operation. In the same way, our Good Shepherd had to reach into this thorny world of sin to rescue us. It cost Him dearly—“sore wounded by the thorn.” And once again we are asked to touch Jesus’ hands—not the delicate hands of an infant, but the pierced hands of the Crucified. Dr. Janzow invites us in so doing to

*Embrace the Christ child, and with songs
Bind up the hearts of men.
To shepherd-healer-king let throngs Sing glorias again.
Sing glorias again.*

My conversation with Dr. Janzow ended with him making a comment about “the power of Christian song.” This is the power of the Christmas carol which is able to “bind up the hearts of men” by spreading the Gospel in such poetic and melodic beauty!

! – A Carol Of Excitement

As much as I would like to tell you the exact meaning and derivation of the word “carol,” I cannot. No one knows for sure. It could have come from the Greek “Kyrie eleison,” or “chorea,” or from late Latin “caraula.” While the experts may debate this endlessly, the most likely source is the Medieval French word “carole” which is a name for a circle dance. It can therefore be said with some certainty that a carol is a dancelike song. Now doesn’t that sound like fun? And that is what Christmas should be!

Many of the most beloved Christmas carols suggest a rollicking, good time. Whose toes don’t start tapping when hearing a quick and cheerful rendition of “Joy to the World” or “Deck the Halls”? A carol has come to us from the South of England, a region called Sussex, which captures this mood perfectly!

*On Christmas night all Christians sing
To hear the news the angels bring,
News of great joy, news of great mirth,
News of our merciful King’s birth.*

The song is correct. What do all Christians do on Christmas Eve? They sing the good news, don't they! And shouldn't we couch the Gospel of Jesus Christ in giddy carols characterized by "great joy" and "great mirth?" Of course there are those who claim they can't sing. If you cannot sing, then shout, yell, jump, and dance! You cannot be silent and sad.

*Then why should men on earth be sad
Since our Redeemer made us glad,
When from our sin He set us free
All for to gain our liberty?*

*When sin departs before Thy grace,
Then life and health come in its place.
Angels and men with joy may sing,
All for to see the newborn King.*

There's the Gospel so pure and simple we can all rejoice in it. This text and the unbelievably lively melody are too good to have come from the pen of one author or one composer. It must have come out of the ages like a folk song does, tossed from one generation to the next, each adding its own touch as it shares in the joy. Musicians call this rhythm a quick 6/8 time or a "Jig" by various spellings, as in "to dance a jig."

To pick a favorite Christmas carol is nearly impossible. Each has a genius of its own and makes its own contribution to the season. But if a "carol" is a "dancing tune," then the "Sussex Carol" best captures the idea.

St. John writes of Jesus, "*In Him was life, and that life was the Light of men . . . The true Light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.*" (John 1:4,9). The carol suggests that this news is so great that it "made" the angels sing of it. May we all sing and rejoice as we are invited to do by the last stanza!

*From out of darkness we have light,
Which made the angels sing this night,
"Glory to God and peace to men
Now and forevermore. Amen."*

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